

Chapter 9

Conclusion

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Abstract

This is the final chapter of this book, which summarises the story in the book and its contributions. This chapter also proposes further research directions that stem from the research findings presented in the earlier chapters.

Keywords: Higher education; European Higher Education Area; EHEA; European project; Europe

This book has presented a collective case study of the four European Higher Education Area's (EHEA) founders' perspectives on the role of the EHEA, viewed as a case of European cooperation in higher education (HE), in understanding the evolving mission of the European project, that has increasingly been transcending the borders of the European Union (EU). The temporal focus covered the early 2020s (data collection finished in 2022 but the analysis also considered political developments in the European region up to mid-2024).

This exploration was framed by the neo-institutionalist approach. In brief, neo-institutionalism enables the analysis of organisational behaviour by focusing on how organisations (or in other terms – institutions), both formal and informal, interact among one another and with a wider society and, more importantly, how organisations change under the influence of wider processes – contextual factors that influence these organisations and are, in turn, influenced by them (Peters, 2019). In this book, both the EHEA itself (as well as its stakeholders on the national level of the signatory countries) and the European project have been viewed as organisations, albeit, understandably, of a different nature. There are four key interconnected strands of neo-institutionalism: historical, sociological, rational choice (Peters, 2019) and discursive neo-institutionalism (Schmidt, 2014).

European Cooperation in Higher Education, 121–127



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All the strands consider institutions as the main variable in analysing phenomena related to politics.

A thematic analysis of 25 interviews with major HE actors in the four EHEA's founders (Germany $n = 8$, France $n = 4$, Italy $n = 7$, UK $n = 6$) and the analysis of 64 official communications, most of which were produced by these key actors between 2016 and 2022, generated important timely and original findings. Based on these findings, this study contributes to literature and informs policy practice.

The analysis in the previous chapters has demonstrated that European cooperation in HE, exemplified by the EHEA, has been a platform for the meaning-making process of the European project's mission which has been gaining momentum in supporting political stability in the European region, predominantly recently – in the early 2020s. The findings presented in this book suggest that the stakeholders of each of the EHEA's founding countries (i.e. Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom), despite having different priorities and visions for their memberships in the EHEA and EHEA's role for Europe, have all been contributory to the making of the purpose of the European project as an insurer of stability and dialogue among the countries.

More specifically, Germany's EHEA membership is viewed by Germany's Bologna stakeholders largely as a tool for generating and maintaining political stability in the European region, and Germany is an active leader in this process. France's Bologna stakeholders have taken more of a moderating role in the leading process of the European region, together with Germany. In their stability-seeking process, the Bologna stakeholders of both France and Germany rely on the EHEA as a key platform. Aside from this, Italian Bologna stakeholders, despite taking an important coordinating role in the EHEA, have been trying to stay apolitical before succumbing to the unavoidable connection between politics and HE. This behaviour may, arguably, stem from the inherent contradiction in the Italy's attempts to combine its continuing EHEA membership, linked to Europeanisation (Kushnir, 2021), and Italy's increasing Euro-scepticism, coupled with Italy's ongoing commitment to the security of the region (Zulianello, 2022). A similar conflict seems to be present in the attitude of England, Wales and N.Ireland (EWNI) – one of the two UK members in the EHEA, along with Scotland which is the other UK member in the EHEA. However, this conflict is expressed differently in EWNI's positioning of its EHEA membership. EWNI, where England's Bologna stakeholders lead relevant work (Kushnir & Brooks, 2022), have been observing EHEA developments and wider politics around it, maintaining the established cooperation ties in the area of HE with other countries in the EHEA but looking outwards to establish similar ties with other regions. For Scotland, HE cooperation in the framework of the EHEA is a platform to extend the politics of Europeanisation, shaken after Brexit.

The research spelled out in this book *contributes*, first and foremost, to the body of literature that investigates European HE and European politics as there has been a lack of knowledge about the four founders of the EHEA, and particularly the interconnectedness of their EHEA membership agendas and their wider political agendas. Previous research on this topic comprises a lot of single-country studies (e.g. Chies et al., 2019) and collective case studies

(e.g. [Marquand & Scott, 2018](#)), but they lack data from all four EHEA's founding countries. The main focus of many earlier studies was on evaluating the implementation of the Bologna Process (BP) in the given countries (e.g. [Antoniolli, 2006](#); [Field, 2005](#); [Guth, 2006](#); [Malan, 2004](#)). The foci of recent studies (e.g. [Kushnir, 2023](#); [Kushnir & Yazgan, 2023](#); [Marquand & Scott, 2018](#)) are more varied but they have not explored EHEA's founders jointly as a case for informing our understanding of European politics. One exception is my recent co-authored article ([Kushnir & Yazgan, 2024](#)) which analyses the geopolitics of the European HE space, but it came out from this same project and represents its extract. This collective case study of the strategic significance of continuing work in the framework of the EHEA by the founding countries of the EHEA, presented in this book, makes an important contribution to the scholarship about European HE and European politics. This book advances our fragmented knowledge about EHEA's founders, which started to be pieced together in my earlier articles ([Kushnir & Brooks, 2022](#); [Kushnir, 2023, 2025](#); [Kushnir & Yazgan, 2023, 2024](#)).

Second, the study reported here addresses a temporal-contextual gap in the available field of research on the EHEA by covering the current period – early 2020s – namely after the main recent milestone in the development of the EHEA in 2020 ([EHEA, 2024b](#)), which also coincided with a couple of other significant events in European geopolitics, such as the end of the Brexit transitional period and the start of a full-scale Russia–Ukraine war. This temporal focus has been an under-researched gap in prior scholarship on European HE and European politics. While many researchers, especially those exploring UK HE, have analysed HE and Brexit (e.g. [Ploner & Nada, 2019](#); [Zotti, 2021](#)), their works did not aim to serve as a context specifically for the discussion of the EHEA. There are, of course, a couple of exceptions. For example, [Veiga's \(2023\)](#) reflective piece discusses the EHEA in the Brexit context but not specifically after EHEA's 2020 deadline and the war context in Ukraine, neither does it research the stakeholders' view from EHEA's founders. Aside from this, EHEA's post-2020 developments have not been investigated in prior related research. Those who acknowledged EHEA's 2020 deadline did so with the apparent anticipation of the end of the work on the EHEA in 2020 (e.g. [Gareis & Broekel, 2022](#); [Mendick & Peters, 2022](#); [Pires Pereira et al., 2021](#)).

Third, this book has highlighted an innovative theoretical dimension in the topic European HE and European politics by relying on neo-institutionalism. Borrowing the insights from the four strands of neo-institutionalism for the analysis of the role of European cooperation in HE in the evolving mission of the European project has also contributed to the addressing of the third major gap in the scholarship on European HE and Europeanisation. There is a lack of application of neo-institutionalism in this area. The rational-choice strand has been key in exploring the strategic importance of the memberships of the four EHEA founders for them and for the European region. This was investigated by relying on the voices from major organisations related to the implementation of the BP in the four countries of interest. The analysis also considered the unavoidably bounded nature of the rational choices of policy actors ([Simon, 1990](#)), as it helped

to see what was possible in the rational decisions that have been taken by these actors.

In addition, historical neo-institutionalism was key to understanding path dependency in these decisions and any developments that stemmed from them. Aside from this, the key role of individuals in shaping organisational responses was explored with the help of sociological neo-institutionalism (Peters, 2019). This was related to the voices from the organisations represented in the interview sample, in particular. The final strand of neo-institutionalism – discursive neo-institutionalism – overlaps with the other three strands. Discursive neo-institutionalism has been useful in appreciating that the discourses generated and maintained by the organisations, mentioned above, were represented in the data generated by the project – official communications and, partly, the interviews with the representatives from these organisations. These discourses have shaped the essence of the processes at stake.

The findings of the study presented in this book and its limitations, mentioned below, can serve as a stepping stone to *further research* in such three main areas: exploring the perspectives of other EHEA countries on the role of European HE cooperation for the development of Europe, looking in particular at the growing context of far-right movements and related populism and Euroscepticism in Europe with regard to the positioning of the European cooperation in HE as a foundation for the development of Europe; and investigating the reasons and implications for the growing interconnectedness of the EHEA processes with other European HE processes particularly those related to the European Education Area (EEA).

The first area for further investigation is the perspectives of Bologna stakeholders in other EHEA countries on the role of their cooperation in the framework of the EHEA for the European project. This book looked only at four out of the active 47 EHEA signatories, excluding the two suspended members, namely the Russian Federation and Belarus (EHEA, 2024a). These four countries are the founders of the EHEA. However, they do not have any formally allocated more dominant role in leading the EHEA, apart from the established power dynamics where, for example, Germany and France cooperate in leading the European region in general, and Italy coordinating many recent developments in the EHEA, as explained in the earlier chapters. Further research would be beneficial into other EHEA members' perspectives on the role of European cooperation in HE for Europe, particularly the non-EU countries that belong to the EHEA and those traditionally not viewed as European such as Kazakhstan (Kushnir, 2016). Analysing the implications for Europe of not expelling the Russian Federation and Belarus from the EHEA but rather suspending their memberships is also an interesting angle to the issue at stake. Juxtaposing the findings in this book and those from the suggested further research in this area would shed more light on the relationship between HE cooperation in the framework of the EHEA and the development of the European project.

Besides further investigating the perspectives of other EHEA countries on the role of HE cooperation for Europe, another focus for future related studies should be on the growing context of far-right movements which have been facilitating

populism and Euroscepticism in Europe (Schraff & Pontusson, 2024) with regard to the instrumental role of European cooperation in HE for Europe. Data collection for this book finished before such significant political events took place as, for instance, the 2024 European Parliament election featuring far-right gains in France (European Parliament, 2024) and the 2024 snap French legislative election which Macron had hoped would demonstrate strong support for him. Instead, it created a political chaos as while the far-right did not win, Macron's centrist coalition coming in second, giving way to the left-wing party New Popular Front coalition to come in first. The uncertainty brought about by the surprise early election following far-right gains in the European Parliament election has led Macron not to appoint a left-wing Prime Minister (Chabal & Behrent, 2024). This is an important changing context in Europe, and its relationship to HE should be further explored in next related studies that explore the post-2020 context beyond the early 2020s.

Finally, further research should investigate the reasons and implications for the growing interconnectedness of the EHEA with other European HE processes (Grek & Russell, 2024) particularly those related to the EEA. While the EHEA has been working on (re)establishing its distinctiveness (Kushnir, 2025), the interconnections between the EHEA and specifically some of the EEA processes such as the European universities initiative have been apparent (Kushnir, 2022). Deliberate efforts to do this are, in part, surprising, given the positioning of the establishment of the EEA as a means to deepen the relationships specifically among the EU member states (Kushnir, 2021) which has signified EU's 'renewed state-making ambitions' (Robertson et al., 2022, p. 65). However, it would be naïve to anticipate a complete segregation of the EHEA and EEA initiatives as they do share many commonalities not just in terms of the countries which are their members but also in the nature of the HE cooperation initiatives they promote. While the EEA is briefly discussed in Chapter 3 as part of the context for the focus of this book, the relationship between the EHEA and the EEA was beyond the scope of this study. Yet, this relationship is an important area to investigate in further research to grasp the evolving nuances of the interconnection between HE cooperation initiatives in Europe in continuing exploring their role in the making of Europe.

European cooperation in the area of HE might seem to be a very peculiar case of what shapes and, in turn, reveals the unfolding mission of the European project, which itself by default is always under construction. As this book has demonstrated, not only European cooperation in HE has historically been crucial for the making of Europe, but it has recently played a remarkably important role in uniting the peoples of the European Union and around it in the pursuit of a common goal of building social capital in the region while promoting the interconnectedness and friendships among the countries on various levels. Perhaps, this is precisely the reason that the study of Europeanisation through HE cooperation initiatives is such a promising and productive field of research.

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